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2001-113

## Seamen's Church Institute dedicates simulator training facility in Houston

by Debra Wagner

(ENS) Nearly 200 representatives from the regional maritime industry, the Port of Houston Authority, the Coast Guard, the church, and local government celebrated a commitment to advanced professionalism at the May 10 dedication of a state-of-the-art simulator training facility in Houston's Seamen's Church Institute Center for Maritime Education. It is SCI's third simulator, offering world-class instruction for professional mariners.

"Training is more than increased efficiency. A well-trained crew saves lives and protects the environment," said the Rev. Peter Larom, executive director of SCI. Thirteen leading maritime companies in the Gulf Coast region have already committed to more than 40 weeks of training over the next five years.

The training offers professional mariners an opportunity to refine their skills in an environment that simulates real life. The four bridges are the actual size of a wheel house and the simulations are constructed from field research, including digital photography, to produce details such as shore-side landmarks. Set in 50-foot diameter theaters, the screens offer peripheral as well as forward views. The simulation even includes the sounds and vibrations of the engine.

"It would be too expensive for one company to purchase this type of technology. We just finished a week of training here and our pilots were more than impressed," said Berdon Lawrence, chairman of the  
Kaiser Corporation. He also noted that the facility "did



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Kirby Corporation. He also noted that the facility did not grow out of a need to meet some state or federal regulation. Instead, it stands as a shining example of our industry's voluntary commitment to be proactive."

To promote safety, the American Waterways Operators instituted the Responsible Carrier Program in 1994, which mandates continual training of vessel operators.

### **Divine intervention?**

"The program provides guidelines to create a national transportation system that is reliable, safe, and environmentally benign," said Thomas Allegretti, president of American Waterways Operators. "We wondered how we could achieve this when divine intervention stepped in and a man in a collar told us that a church institute could provide sophisticated simulator-based training."

"SCI takes the mission of the church into the heart of its very sophisticated training for mariners," said Bishop Don Taylor of the Diocese of New York, who blessed the facility. "To broaden concern for God's creation and care for the safety of each individual soul is evident in this unique undertaking."

The Diocese of Texas also welcomed SCI with a Bible presented by the Rev. Laurence Gipson, rector of St. Martin's, Houston, the largest Episcopal congregation in Texas.

### **Increased teamwork**

Last year, over 6,800 ships and 158,000 barges traveled the challenging Houston Ship Channel. These vessels navigated more than 30 miles through a narrow channel from Galveston Bay to the Port of Houston.

SCI knew that captains would be challenged by the simulation exercises, but with the ability to have crews of four vessels in one simulation, there is also increased teamwork among the crews and between vessels.

"All of our partners are just beginning to realize the untapped potential of this facility," said Larom. SCI is responding to industry suggestions by developing new courses and creating new databases.



Seamen's Church Institute of New York and New Jersey, founded in 1834, is an ecumenical agency affiliated with the Episcopal Church. Its mission is to advance the personal, professional and spiritual well being of merchant mariners.

**--Debra Wagner is director of communications for Seamen's Church Institute. Contact her at [dwagner@seamenschurch.org](mailto:dwagner@seamenschurch.org)**

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